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A MAN OF HONOR

A Novel

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By J. S. WINTER

AUTHOR OF "MIGNON; OR, BOOTLES' BABY" "HOUP-LA" "IN QUARTERS" ETC.

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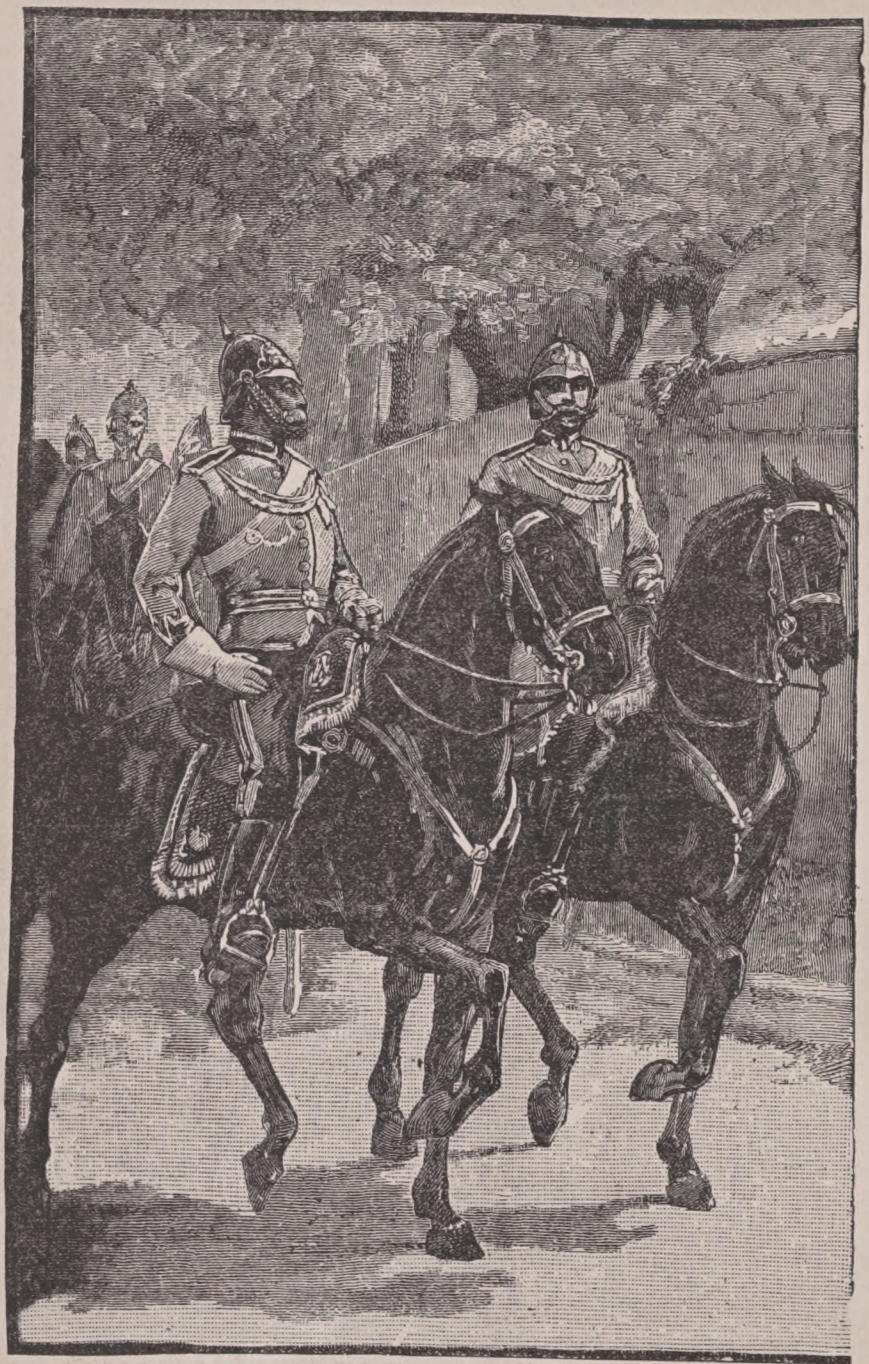
A MAN OF HONOR.



"AWAY THEY WENT, ALL CLATTER AND JINGLE OF SPURS AND SWORD."

ILLUSTRATIONS.

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A MAN OF HONOR.*

CHAPTER I.

The 25th Dragoons—the Black Horse—were having their first taste of a Warnecliffe summer, and found themselves not a little surprised thereby.

Having come to that most choice and cosey of cavalry stations from Aldershot, they imagined, not altogether unnaturally perhaps, that they were proof against anything further in the way of summer weather which the British Isles could produce—and they found themselves mistaken, for, as the pretty little town proved easily and without the shadow of a doubt, Aldershot, for real, genuine, broiling, scorching, merciless, pitiless, August heat was simply

* The author of this story, in selecting this title, was not aware of the fact that it had been used by Mr. George Cary Eggleston in connection with a work which was duly copyrighted and has had a large sale in this country. The title is here retained with the consent of Mr. Eggleston.

not in the same street with it—not to be named in the same breath.

After a few days' experience of it the officers of the Black Horse began to retail sundry anecdotes of tropical life and climes, which some had known of their own knowledge and some knew only by hearsay, and opinion was very equally divided as to whether the barracks should be renamed Aden or Perim, while one or two voters, having rejected with scorn The Desert of Sahara, went the length of suggesting a certain clime the temperature of which is, if mere conjecture goes for anything, more sultry and less variable than any of the aforesaid quarters of this sphere.

They felt the heat the more because they were hard pressed with work. It happened—and the satisfaction they displayed on being made aware of it could only be described adequately by the word supreme—that they had been lucky enough to escape the autumn manœuvres with nothing worse than what they called among themselves "the grind" of getting ready for inspection a month before the usual time.

But when, as came to pass, the whole "grind" of working up for inspection—not a light matter by

any means—had to be done in the face of the fiercest sun which any of them had ever known out of the tropics—why, their satisfaction was considerably damped, or I might, perhaps, more correctly say *melted*.

Towards the end of the month inspection-day came off, and, as Elliot remarked to Lord Archie Falconer, "the sun sat up aloft like a great, big, blatant, blistering, glittering Koh-in-or in a bed of sapphires, and shed, nay, *rained*, heat down upon them till the helmets which shielded—save the mark!—their unfortunate heads seemed red-hot, and the heads inside them were fit to burst.

However, heat or no heat, sunstroke and apoplexy notwithstanding, the inspection at last was finished and done with. The lunch which followed it was eaten, and the gallant and distinguished officer who had come for the purpose of inquiring into the state and efficiency of the regiment returned to town leaving the entire strength in a state of prostration approaching very nigh to complete collapse.

It was towards the close of the afternoon, and several officers were still to be found in the anteroom of the Warnecliffe barracks, in various stages of weariness and fatigue, lying half asleep most of

them in huge chairs, each and all lacking the amount of energy required to accomplish the putting off of gorgeous, gold-broidered tunics and spurred boots for the cool and easy suit of unostentatious and simple tweed. The sleepy silence which prevailed was at length broken by the entrance of a mess-waiter carrying a tray on which he bore a cup of tea and a covered plate, both having the two black chargers rampant which, with three Roman numerals and two laurel branches, formed the device of the regiment.

"Tea and muffins," ejaculated Price to Lord Archie; "why, what a sensible chap you are! After all that thirsty cup, I believe it's the best thing in the world,—tea. Bring me some, James."

"Yes, sir," said James.

"I'll have some, too, James," said Uniacke.

"And I," added Austin.

As James departed by the mess-room door, another officer, also in uniform, just as he had come off the field of hardship in the morning, entered by the other; a handsome, sunny-haired, blue-eyed man of five or six and twenty, long and stalwart of person, and with an expression of countenance much as he might have had if the end of the world had sud-

denly come upon him just at a time when he had an important engagement which he was particularly anxious to keep.

"Why, Hastings, old man," cried Lord Archie, who, never very dejected in spirits, had revived considerably under the influence of the steaming tea, "whatever is the matter? You look like Mariana in the Moated Grange, or as if the day had not agreed with you."

"No more it has," grumbled the new-comer, discontentedly. "Agreed with me, by Jove! I wonder if the news I have just had would have agreed better with any of you."

"Why, what is it?"

"It's a draft of horses for the 119th," Hastings returned. "And Urquhart and I are to have the pleasure of carting them up to Idleminster—nineteen days' march at least. 'Pon my word, the service is come to something, when two of the Black Horse have to go dancing attendance on the 119th—the hundred—and—nineteenth," contemptuously.

"I suppose they want the horses for the manœuvres," said Uniacke.

"Oh, I dare say," returned Hastings, indifferently.

"I'd rather do a nineteen days' march with a draft of horses than the manœuvres *any* day," Lord Archie laughed. "Who else did you say was going? Urquhart?"

"Yes. Urquhart."

"I wish I were in your shoes! What a pity I am not a subaltern now. I would ask the Colonel to send me instead."

"Well, you're not a subaltern, unfortunately," Hastings answered crossly, "and I am. And of course just after inspection no one but yourself is at all likely to wish anything of the kind, so I suppose I shall have to give up all my arrangements. A subaltern! I wish you were a subaltern; but you took care to get yourself made into a blatant captain as soon as ever you had the chance. Hang it, it's the very devil!"

"Of course, work always is," Lord Archie responded promptly. "Inspection was the very blackest of devils; field-days are the devil; parades, too, and mess, if you chance to get near the Colonel. If I were you, Alban, I'd cut the service altogether. I would indeed."

"Oh, I'm not going to do that; only I never expected this, and just now I particularly wanted—"

"Oh! it's *just now*, is it? Ah! I suspected you had some game on that made you loath to leave *just now*," Lord Archie laughed, "otherwise you would be only too glad to get off on march in such superb weather."

"Oh, you always scent a fox where a fox has not been for ages," Hastings answered, reddening a little under the fire of Lord Archie's good-natured chaff; chaff, all the same, which had some grains of wheat amongst it. "It's not that at all; but I wanted to go to town next week for several reasons —see my lawyer and get some clothes—and—and— other things."

"Especially other things," commented Lord Archie, amid the laughter of the listeners. "Well, my dear chap, take my word for it, the word of one who has had considerable experience in such matters, lawyers will keep, and clothes will arrange themselves much more pleasantly just after coming off a march than at any other time. As for *other things* —why, wasn't there a poor devil called Richard, who said, 'Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves'?"

Hastings turned an utterly blank face of stony lack of understanding upon his comrade. But a

moment later he was aroused by a shout of laughter from the other men, when he too laughed, though it was an expression of mirth without any mirth in it. A few minutes afterwards he betook himself off, growling and grumbling as he went.

"Alban," called Austin after him.

Hastings turned back. "Well?" he answered.

"When do you start?"

"Nine in the morning," in a tone of concentrated disgust, which caused the laughter to bubble out again, and him to close the door with a decision which quite prevented any further questions.

As the laughter died away Lord Archie turned to Austin. "Who is it?" he asked.

"I don't know. She lives out a mile or two beyond the castle, and she's awfully pretty," Austin replied.

"Ah! I thought so. Poor old Alban; what a transparent soul it is! And to go with Urquhart of all men, if he is in that frame of mind."

"Yes, it is unfortunate," Price put in, "for Urquhart somehow is not calculated to lend himself very readily to Alban's little ways."

"She's a lady; rides a lot," cried Austin, hastily. "Alban does not even know her name."

"Oh!" murmured Lord Archie. "Well, poor old man, I must say that's rough on him, for perhaps she is only staying here. Ah! here is Urquhart."

As Lord Archie spoke Urquhart entered, as tired and hot as his fellows, but looking neither listless nor discontented with his lot, even though it included the prospect of a nineteen days' march in the worst heat of summer.

"Hello, Urquhart; heard the news?" Lord Archie cried.

"Oh, yes. I've just left the Colonel. Have any of you seen Hastings?"

"Yes. He has just gone from here. Don't seem to like his prospects either."

"No. His face when the Chief called him into the office and imparted the news was a study—a study; and I fancy my going does not tend to make it any pleasanter to him."

"I dare say not. Staunton would have suited him better," carelessly.

"Well, between you and me," Price remarked, "it must be rather a grind, particularly just after inspection."

"Oh, I don't know," Urquhart answered; "no

more a grind than anything else. After all, what isn't a grind when you come to think of it? If you know a greater grind than the Major—St. Aubyn, I mean—when he gets on to those everlasting politics—yarn—yarn—yarn—till you don't feel sure whether Lord Beaconsfield and the People's William were the Siamese twins or the Two-Headed Nightingale—well, commend me to it."

"Oh, I don't know. I almost think the Chief is worse when he gets fairly 'on' about 'Wolseley's gang.' 'What is the army now, sir? A profession of arms, straining every nerve to serve her Majesty and keep the honor of England unstained? No, sir, it has been degraded into a mere vehicle for conferring favors where they are *not* merited; the honor of the army is broke, sir—broke.'"

"Yes," said Urquhart, "but he is easier to follow than politics."

CHAPTER II.

AWAY they went, all clatter and jingle of spurs and sword, and the trappings of tall black chargers —all glitter and dash, and that air of gayety which seems to be an indispensable part of the soldier's equipment, although, in very truth, it is oftentimes as thoroughly a sham as the paper-soled boots with which our volatile brothers of the sword on the other side of the silver streak went out from Paris in all the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war—*à Berlin;* and came back—those who were not left on the road *à Berlin* until the crack of doom—worn and weary and heart-broken, a brilliant nation crushed and trodden to the earth by the humiliation and defeats which had been brought upon them by their own insatiable love of change and folly, the folly of spending money in about the proportion of three francs on decorations to as many centimes for shoes—an example which, by the bye, we have followed pretty closely lately in sending our best and bravest into the heart of the African

desert, covered with honors, and never a decent sword to protect them.

If I had but my way I would make but short work of the sordid brutes who supplied some of the swords which our army carried into that slough of despond which we call the Soudan—swords which bent and split at a blow. Ah! if I had but my will, every man who made the profit of a single farthing out of the hearts' blood of his own countrymen should find himself on the spot stained by the blood of a better man than himself, surrounded by hordes of yelling blacks, and armed with nothing but his profits. While as for those dishonest servants of the Crown who passed these make-believe sabres, I would not so much as give them the benefit of their bribes to help them. I would leave them to the mercy, the conscience, and the humanity of the gentlemen with the profits.

But to my story—and may I be pardoned for the digression? When the detachment of the Black Horse marched out of Warnecliffe Barracks that fair August morning the air of gayety sat on every man but one. That one was Alban Hastings, who went off with a face like a thunder-cloud just ready to burst into a storm. He growled and grumbled

as he rode along by Urquhart's side—at the heat of the morning, though it was barely nine o'clock, and the sun had scarcely gained power at all; at the tightness of his tunic, the weight of his helmet, the hardness of his charger's mouth, the bore of having to go on march at that time. At all of which Urquhart gave a grunt whenever Hastings paused for breath, or to cast about in his mind for a fresh cause for growling; a grunt which might be taken as his hearer thought most fit, either as a sign of sympathy or as an expression of contempt—contempt too profound for mere words to convey. As Alban Hastings went on growling, and Urquhart did not cease from his labors in the grunting line, we may readily infer that the dissatisfied young gentleman put the former construction upon the proceeding.

So on they went, that incongruous pair, condemned by the exigencies of duty to pass the next nineteen or twenty days in the closest companionship—two men who had nothing whatever (except their duty, which one performed unwillingly, the other scrupulously and well from sheer love of the minutest details of the gallant profession of arms, which at that time was the dearest pursuit on earth to him) in common one with another, the one

grumbling, and the other grunting, as they rode side by side between the green hedgerows under the fair sky of that glorious August morning.

With every yard of ground that his horse's hoofs put between Warnecliffe and himself Urquhart's spirits grew lighter, and his grunts more inclining to laughter; while, on the other hand, his comrade's face grew darker and darker, and his temper correspondingly out of gear. And at last they reached the little market-town where they were billeted that night—a quaint little sleepy bit of a place, with wide rambling squares and streets, and great old-fashioned inns standing like faded and dreary monuments of by-gone days of splendor and prosperity, when His Majesty's Royal Mail, with its smart red wheels and four spanking steppers, was wont to draw up with a flourish at the Rose and Crown, and stir the whole sleepy population into something like life. And then, Briarbush being on the high-road between Warnecliffe and London, there were five or six other coaches each day beside the Royal Mail, and considerable traffic of other kinds from the private posting chaises of noblemen to carts laden with fish from the nearest point on the coast.

Well then might the grand old inns, which had lived and had their being out of all this hurrying to and fro of beasts and men, sit staring with their blank and sightless eyes over the well-nigh deserted town with an air of monumental melancholy, while the streets which had once been thronged and busy were grass-grown and desolate.

"Bah! what a hole!" ejaculated Hastings with a rueful air, as they rode into the market-place.

There was no lack of life or of activity apparent in the population as "the soldiers" drew up in front of the principal hotel, at which the officers were billeted for the night. They rushed out of their houses in a state of the wildest and most frantic excitement—men, women, and children alike—and as the billets were given out, and the men finally dismissed to find them, crowded round closer and closer, until the horses some of them got a trifle fidgety, and Alban Hastings was obliged, as a safety-valve, to swear a little under his breath.

At last, however, the two officers were free to dismount and go clanking into the great echoing stone hall of the inn, or, as it called itself, the Rose and Crown Hotel.

"Ugh! it smells like a grave," growled Hastings,

with a sniff, as he stalked into the best parlor—a stately oak-lined apartment, some five-and-thirty feet by thirty, with fine blue Delft ware plates and vases set here and there, and upon the walls four or five rare old prints in black frames, such as sent Urquhart straight across the room to look at them before he gave the iced cup on the table so much as a glance.

"It's mouldy," asserted Hastings, crossly.

"Of course it is; who ever heard of a Stilton that wasn't?" answered Urquhart, coolly.

"And the claret cup is beastly; the worst I ever drank," Hastings growled in continuation.

"All the more for me, then—I'm frightfully thirsty," returned Urquhart, leaving the old engravings at last for the lunch.

"I wish you joy of it," glancing crossly over the table. "Cold chickens! Ugh! they always give one cold chickens in a hole like this. I wonder why the devil they sent two of us? You could have done just as well without me."

"You know very well why, and I could not have done as well, seeing that neither I, nor you, nor any other fellow on earth could cut myself in halves at Halford and take one draft on to the 151st, while

the other half of the horses go on to Idleminster. And let me tell you, if you are going to grumble and growl all the way there and back in this style I shall promptly seek that girl out when we get back to Warnecliffe, and do my level best to spoil any chance you may have in that quarter. Not out of revenge on your grumbling, mind, but simply to keep the poor soul out of your way."

"What girl?" looking blankly up from the despised chicken, of which he was disposing as fast as circumstances would permit.

"Why, that girl at Warnecliffe. You don't suppose I'm such an idiot as to believe you'd make such a howling row as this if there wasn't a woman at the bottom of it, do you? Because, if you do, Alban Hastings, let me tell you I wasn't born yesterday —no, nor yet the day before. Why, you'll be in love with somebody else before the week is out. I know you, my friend—nobody better."

Before the week was out! Aye, before that very day had grown much older the attractions of the Eve and the paradise which he had left behind had very considerably paled in Alban Hastings's memory.

But to my story. When the two men had

finished their lunch, leaving very little of the chickens, or anything else upon the table, Urquhart drew his chair up to one of the open windows and sat down therein to enjoy his pipe. Hastings followed suit, and there they sat in silence until the time came for going round the billets.

When that drew near, two sergeants, one wearing the blue of the farrier and the distinguishing horse-shoe upon his sleeve, approached the Rose and Crown from the opposite side of the market-place. Alban Hastings gave a great sigh of disgust.

"Ugh! Here's Sergeant Anthony and the Farrier Sergeant," he observed. "I suppose it's time to go round those beastly billets."

Urquhart laughed out aloud. "Come along, and don't be peevish," he said.

"*Peevish!*" repeated Hastings in supreme disgust; but he pulled himself out of his chair with a groan, and settled his forage-cap on his head with all his usual care (not a small amount by any means, let me tell you), caught up his whip and gloves, and followed Urquhart out of the room and down the wide and shallow oaken stairs, black with elbow-grease and the treading feet of many and many a generation. There was a pretty, slender girl, with

"HASTINGS LINGERED AT THE WINDOW."

blue eyes and fair ruffled hair, sitting in the bar, whose glass windows overlooked the hall. As Hastings caught sight of her he went to the window to ask if there were any letters for him.

"No, there were none," she answered—a fact of which he was perfectly well aware before ever he asked the question.

"Nor telegrams?"

The girl shook her head; no, there were no telegrams either. Urquhart—who was inspecting an odd relic in the shape of a horseshoe nailed against an ebony shield, in the centre of which was a small silver plate, with an inscription which told that Cromwell's horse had cast it at the very door and so delayed him in his pursuit of Sir Ralph Ringrose, a famous Royalist, who by this lucky accident escaped with his life and fled over the seas into France, where he married and lived to a good old age—heard it all, and chuckled to think how able and willing poor, ill-used Hastings was to come smiling up to the scratch, if only a pretty face appeared at any point of his horizon.

As there were neither letters nor telegrams, Hastings lingered at the window to give the most careful and minute instructions that they should be sent

up without the delay of a single moment when any did arrive. Oh! there was no second delivery in Briarbush! That was the d——; at least he begged her pardon, but that was a nuisance—distinctly a nuisance. He wondered whether, if he went or sent to the post-office, he should be able to get them? The young lady within the window did not know, but she should think not. She should think not; why? Well, because it was improbable that any letters would be sent on from Warnecliffe until the mail which reached Briarbush at six o'clock in the morning.

And then Hastings, who knew perfectly well that his letters would be addressed to the post-office, and not to the hotel at all, began a fresh dissertation on the likelihood of his being able to obtain his letters if he went to the post-office; but against this Urquhart's patience held out no longer, and he strode out of the house, whither his comrade was obliged to follow him.

CHAPTER III.

After they had been into most of the town billets they had to go along a cool and shady lane, at the end of which stood a quaint, single-storied inn—a rambling red-brick house smothered in ivy and creepers, while roses and honeysuckle clambered up the wide porch, and a little sign swung to and fro, on which was written, "The Haymakers' Rest."

Excepting for the sign, the house had no appearance of being an inn: yet it was so; and three of the dragoons and five chargers were quartered there for the night.

In front of the house, away from the porch, where the honeysuckle and the roses grew in such wild luxuriance and beauty, there lay a garden—an old-fashioned bower of a place, all sweet-smelling blossoms and mossy grass, shaded and kept cool by half a dozen grand old elms, which must have stood where they grew for three hundred years or more. Between the garden and the road there was a hedge, thick as a wall and six feet in height, and in the

hedge there was a little green gate with an old-fashioned latch (what north-country folk call a "sneck"), and over the gate was leaning a girl dressed in a plain white-cotton gown—a girl with a fine clear skin like a child, satin-smooth brown hair, and grave gray eyes which regarded Alban Hastings with a look which was straight and true, as unconcerned and as little moved by his gold lace and his jingling spurs as by the eager and open admiration which lighted up his face and filled his blue eyes so completely that Urquhart's lips were smiling broadly as they turned into the yard, where the horses were standing in anticipation of their coming.

Urquhart was amused to see how small—less than usual, which was needless—was the interest which Hastings took in the proceedings; how, as his hand was passed here and there (with a view to discovering a tendency to sore backs), and critical glances were cast at legs and heels, the blue eyes wandered in the direction of the garden, which they could not see from the stable-yard; and, finally, how the long legs sauntered off to the gate before the second of the five horses had undergone his inspection.

Now the gate of the stable-yard was like that of the garden: it commanded a particularly fine view

of the high-road, with its white dusty surface and its ragged fringe of almost equally dusty grass. Unfortunately for Hastings, although he could see the break in the green line of the tall hedge where the little gate was set, he could not see the girl of the grave gray eyes and the simple cotton frock. Still, every now and then he could get a glimpse of the lowest frill of the frock, as she moved her position slightly, and that was something.

It is a wonderful thing how often little scenes and incidents, which in themselves would never have power to attract us for a moment, become, through and by reason of the interest which they arouse in others, the objects of our special attention. It was so on that memorable August afternoon with Alban Hastings of the Black Horse. Left to himself, he would have stood at that gate for a week and never have noticed the antics of a group of children at play in the road. Not even though they were fine, plump, happy, healthy little specimens of English boys and maidens, with finely-rounded sturdy limbs, with cheeks like roses and hair like ripened corn in sunshine, nor even though they might have stepped straight out of one of Birket-Foster's green and flowery studies of our English lanes and meadows.

No, nor even though they had caught the fever consequent on the advent of the soldiers, and were—bless their little hearts!—drilling and marching with as much care and earnestness as did ever a Prussian recruit under the lindens in sunny Coblentz. They quarrelled, of course: what bairns at play do not, except they are such little duffers as to have no interest in their games?

"Yes, it is—right face—"

"No—face—face. I tell you I know quite well. Face." And face they presently did with such a vengeance that one little toddling four-year-old, as eager for action as her fellows, lost her footing, and fell heavily—and very much face indeed—to the ground.

Naturally enough a piercing shriek was the first result of this proceeding. Then Hastings and the gray-eyed girl in the cotton frock ran out from their respective posts of observation, and the little sufferer was raised between them.

Between her awe, delight, and surprise at finding her hurts attended to by one of the grandest and most attractive (from a millinery point of view) of the soldiers, her love of the young lady and the pain of her bruises, the little Birket-Foster was torn no

"HASTINGS WAS SYMPATHY ITSELF."

less than three ways at once. But bruises were ordinary and every-day matters when put in comparison with the importance and pleasure of being cuddled close up against that military coat with its fascinating array of frogs and hanging tabs of braid, while the handsome fair face with blue eyes was as full of concern as if the accident had happened to the young lady instead of to the little girl, and the young lady at the same time was investigating into the full extent of the damage, her strong and tender hands tending the poor little bruised bare knees, not only bruised, but, alas! cut and bleeding freely. So the little maid pulled herself together, and, leaning her golden head back against the soldier's shoulder in ineffable contentment, ceased her cries and gave herself up to thoroughly enjoying the newness and dignity of her situation, only a sob now and then catching her breath, or a stray tear trickling down her rosy cheek just to remind the world—if the bleeding knees below were not sufficient to do so—that she had indeed fallen upon very evil times.

Hastings was sympathy itself: he cuddled her close to him, and smoothed the pretty golden head, while the young lady in the white frock, having gone down upon her knees, gently held her hand-

kerchief to the cuts, and gave as many assurances of condolence as any little maid on earth could wish for.

"It was all Johnnie's fault," put in another tot, a shade bigger but less sturdy than the sufferer in Hastings's arms. "He pushed her; I saw him. Johnnie's always pushing somebody; he's such a rough boy. He pushed me the other day, and I told mother, I did;" and forthwith, having the usual fine sense of honor for which the ordinary feminine mind—no matter whether old or young—is distinguished, she pointed the finger of scorn and identification at the luckless Johnnie—which was altogether needless, his own scarlet face telling a clearer tale of shame and contrition than the tongue of any little sneak in the whole population of Briarbush had power to do.

But it was a brave and generous little soul that lay against Alban Hastings's heart. She flushed up scarlet—as scarlet as Johnnie himself, and from her proud haven of safety and repose thrust out a little chubby hand which had a woful skin-scrape upon its palm, and tucked it into Johnnie's larger one.

"Johnnie didn't push me; I tumbled off myself," she burst out indignantly; "and *my* mother says

you're a little mean sneak, Jennie Moore; and so you are, always telling tales of somebody."

"I b'lieve I did," began Johnnie, stammering, when the little maid caught him up sharply.

"And if you did, you didn't go for to do it wilful."

"You darling!" broke out the gray-eyed girl.

"By Jove, but what a plucky little soul!" cried Hastings, admiringly.

"Mother never lets us tell tales, Johnnie knows," asserted little Birket-Foster, stoutly, "not if it wasn't done wilful."

"And I didn't," cried Johnnie, earnestly.

"No, I am sure you did not, Johnnie," said the young lady in reassuring accents.

"I wonder if some sweeties would help to mend the poor knees," suggested Hastings, who felt that Urquhart's inspection in the stable-yard would soon be over, and his time therefore getting short. "Do you think they would?"

"I like sweeties," said little Birket-Foster.

"I'm sure you do," putting her down upon her feet and feeling in his watch-pocket, the only pocket he was in the possession of at that moment—a mere little make-believe affair hidden away behind the

braiding on his breast. "Here is a shilling—that's to spend. And here is a half-sovereign—and mind, that's to keep."

A moment later the whole tribe had gone flying along the road, but not before two very vigorous kisses had been left upon Alban Hastings's lips; he would have been puzzled to tell, I fancy, how, when, and where he had ever been kissed by a child before.

"It is a mine of gold to her," said the white-robed girl, with a smile, as she watched the retreating troop. "Half-sovereigns do not fly about Briarbush like the sparrows."

"No, I suppose not," smiling. "In most cases it would do no good to give it, but that child's mother must be a grand woman to have brought her children up with such pluck and honor as that."

"I believe she is. She is the head-keeper's wife —Lord Cliffe's keeper, you know. They live at the cottage in the lane, and I think she was maid to Lady Cliffe; her foster-sister too."

"Oh!" murmured Hastings with much apparent interest.

"She takes great care of her children. She has only those two," the young lady went on, as she

edged away from the scene of the disaster towards the little green gate.

"They do her great credit," returned Hastings with an air of being quite up in the subject.

"Oh yes, they are good little souls. My mother often has them to do models for her."

Hastings pricked up his ears. "To do model" meant the following of some artistic pursuit, and he had been puzzled to discover who and what this ministering angel with the grave eyes and the satin-smooth hair might happen to be.

"Then you do not belong to—" he began; then stopped short, aware all at once that the remark was bordering on the impertinent.

A faint smile curled the girl's lips. "My mother is not the mistress of the Haymakers' Rest," she said, a gleam of fun shining in her grave gray eyes. "Oh no; we are only lodging here for the summer. It is a very quiet house, and they cook better than the farm-people."

"And your—at least, Mrs.—er—er—is an artist?" he asked.

"Yes. I dare say you know her name—Mrs. Dane."

Hastings's face flushed up with pleasure. "Mrs.

Dane—and in Briarbush? Oh! may I not call on her before we leave? I should so like to make her acquaintance."

"I am sure my mother will be most happy," Miss Dane replied, and yet; courteous as the answer was, there was that about it which altogether prevented him from feeling the least little bit flattered by the permission.

"Will you come in now?" she asked, as she pushed the gate open.

"Thanks, many—not just now. I am," with a long shrug of his shoulders, "on duty; but in an hour or so, if you will allow me, I shall be delighted."

"Oh yes, certainly. And who shall I—"

"Hastings—my name is Hastings—Alban Hastings, of the 25th Dragoons," with a hurried salute.

"Then good-by for the present," with a dignified yet gracious bend of her slender throat.

As she spoke Urquhart came out of the stable-yard, followed by the two sergeants. Hastings once more saluted Miss Dane, who retreated behind the shelter of the thick hedge, though not before Urquhart had had time to get a good look at her.

If it had not been for the knowledge that she was in the garden, Urquhart could have laughed out

aloud to see the change which within the last half-hour had come upon his comrade's face. Where then had lowered the blackest and most sullen of thunder-clouds now was naught but sunshine, as radiant as that in the heaven above them; all the growling, grumbling discontent had departed out of his voice, and in its place had come a cheery heartiness, which proved to the man who knew him infinitely better than he knew himself that the Eve and the paradise which lay behind had faded and paled into insignificance before the charms of the Eve who abode at the Haymakers' Rest. Urquhart, who thought she was the very superior daughter of an evidently well-kept and quiet house, felt not a little contemptuous at a fancy so lightly and so easily swayed by all winds—a fancy veering from north to south, from east to west, at the will of any magnet which took the shape of a woman's eyes. It was pretty nearly all one to Mr. Alban Hastings of the Black Horse, tbe they brown or blue, hazel or gray, dark or light, grave or gay, sad or coy.

"It *is* a beastly little hole," Urquhart remarked, with as good an imitation of the other's morning growl as he could attain.

But Hastings did not see it. "Oh! I don't

know," he answered. "It's a decent little place enough, and I fancy the fishing hereabouts is superb: it ought to be with that weir across the river. I think, when we get back to Warnecliffe, I shall write to Lord Cliffe and tell him I'd like to try his waters."

Urquhart smothered his laughter, though he nearly choked in the attempt, and Hastings chatted affably on.

"It's such a quaint little place, too—just what I should have thought *you* would like, Urquhart," reproachfully. "I shouldn't at all wonder, if you went prowling about the cottages a little, if you wouldn't pick up heaps of those old mugs and cupboards and things you set such great store by."

"I might begin with the Haymakers' Rest," suggested Urquhart; then added, seeing that Hastings's face grew as black as death instantly, "for it looks to me as if it might have stood there since the Deluge."

"Oh, I don't think it's a particularly old place," answered Hastings, with a delicious air of indifference, such as sent Urquhart off into the Rose and Crown a good deal more quickly than he would have done had Hastings come back as he set out—in the sulks.

CHAPTER IV.

When he reached the best parlor of the Rose and Crown Urquhart rang the bell.

"Bring me a glass of brown sherry, John, and some paper and pens and ink. What time does the post go out?"

"Eight o'clock, sir," John replied.

As the waiter went out Hastings strolled in. He had on entering the hotel sauntered straight (on the magnetic principle again, doubtless) to the window of the bar; but, unfortunately, the pretty, fair-faced girl, with her soft eyes and blonde ruffled hair, was *non est*, having in truth gone to her tea in the landlady's parlor, and as her place for the time was filled by the master of the house—an enormously rotund, rubicund creature, good-humored and lazy, the very type of a Boniface, perfect from an artist's point of view, but not of the magnetic order of being (to Hastings, at least)—that young gentleman had very speedily brought his remarks concerning his letters and the weather to a close, and took his lonely and

disappointed way in the direction of the best parlor, encountering as he went a figure in a lilac printed gown and a neat white cap, whom he took to be the chambermaid.

Nor was he wrong. As he approached she stepped aside, in order to make way for him, into a deep window recess. Hastings, not perhaps wishing to take the carpet-way of a lady, stepped aside likewise, and was preparing to dispute the point, when to his horror he discovered that, instead of the plump and comely little body he had naturally expected to find in the chambermaid of such an hotel as the Rose and Crown, this was an aged maiden of skinny person and vinegarish aspect. Hastings doubled like a hare, without waiting to dispute right of way any further; he took it without compunction or hesitation, feeling very much as if "that beggar Orford" had slipped the back-door key of the officers' quarters (about nine inches long) down the back of his neck.

"What are you going to do, Urquhart?" he asked, standing with his back to the empty fireplace, and wishing that there could be a roaring fire there for ten minutes or so, just to take that cold chill off his spine.

"HASTINGS AND THE CHAMBERMAID."

"I've got some letters to write, and then I shall go just down the street. I want one or two things I forgot yesterday."

"Oh! Well, I think I shall go and look round the place now. See you again, old fellow—by-by."

Boniface was still in possession of the bar when Hastings reached the hall again, so he did not linger there, but set off for the Haymakers' Rest without further delay.

He found Mrs. Dane and her daughter in possession, as he and Urquhart were at the Rose and Crown, of the best parlor, but the two rooms had not many features in common. Instead of gloomy black oak and dark old prints this room was clad in chintz, and had roses meandering up and down the walls, while real ones looked in at the open windows and nodded their perfumed heads at their counterfeit fellows, as much as to say, "Why do you stand so still, sister roses? Why do you grow in there, where there is nothing but shadow? Why don't you come out with us and dance in the sunshine?" But it was no use; there the poor sham roses remained on the wall: they danced not in the sunshine, nor swayed in the breezes. They never shed their petals, nor gave out sweet fragrant scents to

perfume the air. No, they only sat there on the wall and gazed blankly at nothing, with no change from day to day or from month to month, except that they lost their complexions and grew, from being more bright and gaudy than the real flowers out in the sunshine, to faded old-maids who might even some day sink into a green and yellow melancholy.

Hastings felt, as he disposed of himself in a great chintz-covered chair a few feet from Mrs. Dane's sofa, that it might not be artistic, no, nor yet fashionable, to really like and feel cheered by a wall-paper which was strewed all over with very red and very yellow roses, having very green leaves on a painfully staring white ground; yet, after the mouldy oak and dark leather of the best parlor at the Rose and Crown, he was both cheered and refreshed by it.

He didn't know that he cared very much about being fashionable in his likes and dislikes; and surely, if Mrs. Dane, with her artist's eyes and her doubtless equally fine artist's feelings, could spend her days there without apparently being much the worse for it, he, Alban Hastings, who knew as much about art as he did about needlework, need not be upset by spending a single hour—more than that he

could not and did not hope to have the chance of doing.

He certainly made the very most of his time: he gathered that Mrs. Dane was the widow of a physician, that she was in delicate health, and had no children, except the daughter whose acquaintance he had made that afternoon.

He gathered also that the air of Briarbush was particularly well suited to her during the summer months, which was why she and her daughter buried themselves in the dull little place; that they had tried lodgings at a farmhouse and at the Rose and Crown, but were more comfortable at the Haymakers' Rest than anywhere; and then, having guardedly fished for permission to come over occasionally on his return to Warnecliffe, and received an invitation to come for an hour after dinner that evening if he chose, Mr. Alban Hastings betook himself away, with many expressions of thankfulness and delight at the circumstances which had combined to admit him into such charming company.

Her name was Una—Una Dane!

He had never thought before, not once during all the years of his service—eight of them—that Urquhart was commonplace. Yet when he went

into "the grave" at the Rose and Crown, where Urquhart was enjoying the calm repose of life with a newspaper and a pipe, and asked if he'd been after that girl again, he not only thought him commonplace, but even a shade worse.

"That girl," indeed! As if she were a keeper's daughter or a maidservant; and then he all at once remembered that of course Urquhart hadn't the least idea who Miss Dane was—why, perhaps he even had been stupid enough to imagine she *belonged* to the Haymakers' Rest. Hastings forgot altogether, in the fume of indignation which took possession of him at the mere thought of such a thing, that he had himself put Miss Dane upon the very self-same level until she had informed him to the contrary. But like many another, he thought his comrade most intolerably stupid to be ignorant of what he had only just learned.

He little thought that news of his charmer was already on the way back to Warnecliffe, yet such was the truth. Urquhart's letters had included among them one to Lord Archie Falconer, and that letter contained these remarks:

"By the bye, Hastings, after sulking furiously with fate and me all the way here, found consolation

this afternoon in the person of one of the loveliest girls I think I ever saw. She lives at an old-fashioned inn, called the Haymakers' Rest; is, I suppose, a daughter of the house; certainly does not look like the barmaid, or, for the matter of that, like an innkeeper's daughter. She is about the middle-size, well made and set up, has shining smooth brown hair, and great gray eyes that are very calm and steadfast-looking. I think the rest of her face is lovely, but can only speak positively as to the eyes. Hastings managed to scrape acquaintance whilst I was looking at the horses in the stable-yard. She was in the garden at the side of the house. He has gone up there again. What a beggar he is!"

If Hastings had known that such a description of his new divinity had gone back to Warnecliffe he would have been almost fit to stop the mail-cart that night and get possession of the letter, but he did not, as it happened. He had not the least idea of it, and so the red-wheeled mail-cart went its accustomed journey from the little town to the station two miles away; and not only did it contain the letter I have mentioned, but also another from the same source to the same person—but of that I will

speak when I come to it in the natural course of events.

"I have been," Hastings said, in reply to Urquhart's remark about "that girl," "to call on some ladies."

The air of dignified reproof with which this was given made the other laugh outright; it was so irresistibly funny to be reproved in that dignified and stately manner by Alban Hastings.

"You don't say so! Was *she* one of them?"

"She was."

"And the other?"

"Her mother! Who else should she be?" rather sharply.

"I didn't know. I never make calls on innkeepers' ladies," carelessly.

Hastings's indignation blazed out in a moment.

"She is *not* an innkeeper's daughter. Her mother is Mrs. Dane, the artist. I have been calling on Mrs. Dane this afternoon."

Urquhart's surprise vented itself in the form of a prolonged whistle.

"By Jove, you don't say so! Then how in the world did you come to know her? Did you know them before?"

"'I HAVE BEEN TO CALL ON SOME LADIES!'"

Forthwith Hastings let out the entire story—how the children had been playing at soldiers on the road in front of the inn-garden, how little "Birkett-Foster" had fallen and considerably smashed herself, how—

"And you're going up there again this evening?" Urquhart asked in surprise.

Hastings nodded. "Yes!" he said, with an accent of importance which struck his comrade as the funniest thing he had met with for a long time.

"And you never asked them to let me go too—"

"You?" looking up with a quick frown as if Urquhart had positively declared himself as having designs matrimonial on his heroine of the Haymakers' Rest.

"Yes. Am I not alone, a stranger and a pilgrim in the land of Briarbush, even as yourself? Do I not enjoy cultivated and intellectual society as much, if not a very great deal better, than you do? Would not any one but yourself have thought of a poor forlorn wretch left mouldering by himself in this great barn of a room, which an hour or two ago you appropriately named the 'grave,' and not have gayly accepted, probably even fished for, an invitation without putting in even one good word for him?"

"If I had thought you would have *cared* about it," Hastings began, when Urquhart broke in with a laugh.

"I suppose you were afraid of my being smitten by the lady's grave gray eyes. Bless you, my dear boy, you needn't have been alarmed. I," with a quick sigh, "finished with all that sort of thing years and years ago. Well," rising and moving to the table, "for your own sake I wonder you did not try to do me a good turn; if I had gone I should have talked to mamma and kept her pleased with herself, whilst you would have been free to improve the shining hour with mademoiselle. As it is, mamma must not be neglected; therefore the shining hour will have to go to the wall. You have overreached yourself this time, my friend, no mistake about it."

Hastings looked as if such were indeed the truth, and he knew it. "Shall I send up a note and ask permission to take you?" he asked eagerly.

Urquhart laid back in his chair, and laughed till the tears actually rolled down his face.

"Shall I?" Hastings repeated impatiently.

"Not quite," the other answered. "I don't think I was born an utter fool, and my good-nature does

not feel inclined to carry me quite so far as that. Besides, I thoroughly believe in the truth of the saw:

> "'He that will not when he may,
> When he will he shall have nay.'"

Hastings looked disgusted, but said no more, and as soon as dinner was over went off to the Haymakers' Rest, where, as Urquhart had predicted, he was obliged to devote himself almost entirely to Mrs. Dane, while her daughter sat comparatively silent, apparently engrossed by her occupation of copying a flounce of old point-lace.

And at home—that is to say, in the best parlor of the Rose and Crown—Urquhart was writing his second letter to Lord Archie Falconer.

"I made a mistake about her," he said. "She is not the innkeeper's daughter, nor even his barmaid, but is staying—lodging that is—in the house for the summer months with her mother. Her mother is Mrs. Dane, the artist. Poor old Hastings managed to get himself invited up there this evening, and never mentioned my existence at all. I suppose he thought I should be making eyes at her. True, she is lovely enough for any man to make eyes at, but

Tom Urquhart is far too old and battered for that kind of thing."

He read the letter over with an air of satisfaction ere he put it in its envelope.

"There. I think that will lay the train nicely. I wonder if old Archie will rise to it? He'll get it some time to-morrow. I shouldn't at all wonder if that useful sketch-book of his does not dine to-morrow evening at the Haymakers' Rest."

However, he had for the present no means of telling whether Lord Archie would or would not rise to the bait which he had so skilfully displayed before him; when the morning came, the old parting scene was acted once again, and off went the detachment of the Black Horse from the little town of Briarbush, all dash and clatter and jingle, over the hills and far away, just the same as they always go, whether to peace or war, except that this time there was no accompaniment of martial music, with its cheery strains—"The girl I leave behind me."

CHAPTER V.

THE only information that Urquhart had concerning his bait to Lord Archie was that in the first letter he received from him whilst he was on that march it was mentioned, not actually in the letter, but in a postscript. After many details concerning Urquhart's horses, and more about a certain polo-match between the regiment and the gentlemen of the county, in which the former had come off with an easy victory, he said: "By the bye, I have been over to Briarbrush. She certainly is very lovely."

In replying Urquhart made no comment. He did not think it necessary, once the train was properly laid, nor in subsequent letters did Lord Archie revert to the subject; therefore it was dropped.

Yet the very first afternoon that they were back in Warnecliffe, when Hastings got on a horse and slipped over to Briarbush, to his unutterable dismay and ineffable disgust, he found Miss Dane sitting under the shade of a big elm in the garden of the inn, the artist-mother nowhere to be seen, and Archie

Falconer, if you please, stretched at full length upon the grass beside her, while the river ran swift and deep at their feet, until it came to the weir just at the other side of the meadow, over which it dashed, scattering itself into a myriad twinkling and snowy flecks of light and foam. His face, when he beheld the man in possession, was really and truly a study.

"Why, Archie," he exclaimed, "how came you here?"

"I rode," answered Lord Archie, with sweet simplicity. "You don't mean to say you walked?"

It was an old and threadbare joke, but it served its purpose well.

"I didn't mean that at all," Hastings said stiffly.

"Eh?" murmured the other. "I don't understand."

"Never mind; it's not worth repeating," returned Hastings, in a white heat of fury.

Nor, as the minutes went by, did he begin to feel any better about it, for presently Lord Archie, appealing to Miss Dane about something, said: "Don't you think so, Una?" And she, looking up from her delicate and filmy work with a smile, answered: "You know very well, Archie, that I do not."

Hastings was simply speechless. Una and Archie! Good heavens! how had Archie contrived to make such good use of the last twenty days, that already they should be on such terms of intimacy? How had he found her out? Had he serious intentions towards her? If so, Alban Hastings felt it was all up with him.

However, when he and Lord Archie were riding quietly home together, he, in a measure, solved the mystery, for Lord Archie told him simply and frankly enough that he and Una Dane had been playfellows in the days of their childhood, that their mothers had been girls together, but that he and Una had never met from the time he was a big lad at Eton, and she a little girl just beginning to learn sedateness under the care of a governess.

Now this so thoroughly relieved his mind that he even shut his eyes to the possibility of Lord Archie's being in love with the artist's daughter, which he very really and truly was.

His mind thus relieved, he began to recall how Una had looked; to remind himself that she had flushed all over her pretty pale face when she perceived him coming over the grass towards her; that she had cast a pained glance at him when he spoke so stiffly

to Archie; that she had told him almost reproachfully that he had never asked after little Birket-Foster and her broken knees, although the child had not once been to see "Miss Una" without asking eagerly after him.

"What brutes jealousy does make of us!" said Hastings to himself, with a sharp twinge of compunction, and forthwith went off to town the following morning instead of taking his usual ride, and bought a great heap of toys,—dolls and puzzles and games, with the addition of a rocking-horse for the boy and a box of carpenter's tools,—which he ordered to be sent to Miss Dane, at the Haymakers' Rest, Briarbush.

They had not arrived when he reached the Rest that afternoon with a paper in his pocket, which he had promised to take for the artist, but they came just as they were sipping tea in the cheerful room with the roses in effigy languishing upon the walls. It was worth any amount of trouble to see the pleasure and delight shining in Miss Dane's great gray eyes as she turned the box out and pictured the joy his presents would give to the keeper's children.

"Just think, mother—a doll as large as little B.-F.

herself! Yes, we always call her B.-F. now," to Hastings. "She is so like the pictures. I shall have to make a whole set of garments for it. Old-fashioned to sew? Yes, perhaps; but I love my needle. I dare say it is old-fashioned, but I love to see fine lace and little garments growing from under my fingers quite as much, I think, as my mother loves her art. Oh, what a lovely necklace!" as a string of pretty blue beads came to light; "won't little B.-F. love you! How good you are!"

"I didn't know what to get, you see," Hastings answered modestly. "I have not had much experience in satisfying the likes and dislikes of children. I remember when I was a boy myself I cared for nothing in the world but my pony and—and—one or two little playfellows."

He hesitated a moment, and deftly changed the end of the sentence, for somehow he could not tell her, as he had been going to do, that the favorite plaything of his boyish days had been the gardener's daughter at home. The name of the gardener's daughter seemed to stick in his throat. It happens so sometimes that we do not care to tell about the by-gone days; but oh, how fond of her he was when they were tiny, wee toddling bairns together, like

little B.-F. and the luckless Johnnie—like, and yet not like, brother and sister!

He was sure he had never given her a thought for the last five years—not one; and yet the memory of her as he last saw her kept rising up now and coming between his eyes and Una Dane's beautiful fair face.

What a pretty little child Bessie was—very like the child whom Una spoke of as little B.-F.! He remembered now how eagerly he had been accustomed to look forward to his holidays, not because he was going home, but because Bessie, with her sunny face and blue shining eyes, would be waiting for him when he went down to the gardener's cottage, anxious to catch the first glimpse of him, to hear all his doings, to gloat over his prizes and his deeds of prowess in flood and field—not, you may be sure, made any the less brilliant in tint because they were painted by himself.

And then—he had left the Rest by this time, and was riding slowly back to barracks—when they grew older and school was over and done with, when he had gone to Sandhurst and she had been taken into his father's house to be trained under

his mother's maid, when she had grown fifty times prettier and more "fetching" with that new glad light on her pretty delicate face—a face which had none of the strong lines and calm self-possession about it which were the chief characteristics of Una Dane's countenance—and the shy rapture in the pretty blue eyes, and then, why, he didn't much care to think about his old playfellow after that time—while to remember the scenes which followed some two years later made him feel sick and chill, and caused him to shiver and shudder as he rode along through the gorgeous beauty of the September sunset.

However, as he reached the outskirts of the town he straightened himself in his saddle, and shook his shoulders with a resolute determination to think no more about a past which, whatever it had been, could not now be undone, the consequences of which, however disastrous they might have been to himself or even to others, could not now be averted. The past was past—no thought, no remembrances, no atonement, could alter it. What was done was done, and what had gone by had gone by; and after all, that was, he told himself, a very reasonable and

sensible poet who said—what did he say now? Something or other. Oh—

> "Let the dead past bury its dead;
> Act, act in the living present,
> Heart within—"

Oh, well, after all, he didn't know if a heart wasn't often a nuisance—decidedly a nuisance, if all the hearts with which one had ever had touch were to be allowed to come crowding and worrying after one like a train of pallid, reproachful ghosts at the heels of one's memory. Yes, decidedly and distinctly a nuisance.

Therefore, having come to this conclusion, Hastings resolutely, and with success, shook off the memories of the past and set himself only to the pursuit of winning what he most wished in the present—that was Una Dane.

In furtherance of this end and aim he spent as much of the bright autumn days which followed at the inn with the sign of the Haymakers' Rest as the restrictions of etiquette and the calls of duty would permit.

And what a fine time little B.-F. had of it! What toys and sweeties and tips found their way

"HE WAS GETTING ON IN HIS CULTIVATION OF CHILDREN."

into the little chubby hands and into the white pinafores that kept little B.-F.'s frocks clean!

And by and by that knowing young person grew not to be satisfied with waiting and watching at the gate of the Haymakers' Rest; but she and Johnnie began to venture right down the road leading to the town, so that when Mr. Hastings appeared, whether on horseback or in his dog-cart, little B.-F. was tolerably sure of a lift back again. Really and truly he was getting on in his cultivation of children in detail. As he had said to Una Dane, on that first day after the march was over, he had not had much experience in gratifying the likes and dislikes of children.

Still, he was getting on. The officers of the Black Horse would have been pretty well astonished if they could have seen him riding gayly along the road between Briarbush and the Haymakers' Rest, with little B.-F. on the saddle in front of him, and young Johnnie trotting alongside! And there were two handsome daughters of the house of Hastings, well married, both of them, and blest, among the good things of this world, with a fair share of olive branches, who would, indeed, have opened their blue and lustrous eyes in wonder and amazement if

they could have seen their brother Alban in this new light. Alban, who hum'd and haw'd when called upon to admire one of their babies, and was wont to admit vaguely when fairly driven into a corner that, "Well, ya-as, perhaps *it* is getting a little more human." Alban, who, when the babies were grown larger, was accustomed to remark to the world generally and at large that children were a horrid nuisance, and ought to be farmed out until they had done growing. Alban, of whom there was a legend afloat that once upon a time, being particularly anxious to be civil to one of his sisters he took her eldest girl (aged six) upon his knee and gayly, if very awkwardly, jigged her up and down, chanting the while a kind of refrain,

"Kitch-y, Kitch-y, Kitch-y, nice little girl! Kitch-y, Kitch-y, Kitch-y, nice little girl!" when suddenly "Kitch-y-Kitch-y" created a sensation, and elicited a roar of laughter from the large company assembled, by appealing to her mother in an affected little drawl, quite her own, "Moth-aw! Moth-aw! Is he silly?"

But that was long, long ago, in the by-gone days when lovemaking was not a matter of such serious moment as it had come to be with him since he first

saw Una Dane leaning over the little green gate, watching the Briarbush children at their game of soldiers.

He did not find it as easy a matter to win Una Dane as he had done with little B.-F. Of course she could not be bribed with pretty gifts and kindly notice, and, moreover, there was something so serious, so grave about her—a something which effectually prevented him from making the single step between friendliness and familiarity which hitherto he had invariably found so easy. The two ladies had equally, almost from the very first, given him the footing of an intimate friend, and had made him free of the little rose-wreathed parlor, but with Una he could, by hook or by crook, get no further. He hardly understood her: she was too grave to be coquettish, too self-possessed to be coy; he was sure she liked him, sure he was always the most welcome visitor they had in their retreat; she did not stand aloof, and yet there was that in her manner which would not allow him to approach too near.

Perhaps it was because he had been all his life accustomed to easy conquests—if conquests they could be called, where the victims came and laid their willing necks under his feet, happy even to be

trampled by them; so when the woman he prized most in all the world, instead of yielding to the fascinations of his voice and eyes, and grovelling before him, stood upright in the calm dignity of a fine nature which could not grovel, and would only yield to some greater conqueror than mere fascination, a barrier was raised which to him was the most difficult in all the world to break down.

Nor, whilst they remained in retreat at Briarbush, did he succeed in doing so, and when the end of an exceptionally fine October drew nigh, the rose-parlor was deserted, and the Haymakers' Rest knew them no more.

It was wonderful how blank and dreary the whole neighborhood seemed to Hastings when they had gone. In vain did the little B.-F. and the luckless Johnnie go pattering down the road to meet the good fairy with the cheery laugh and the blue eyes; in vain, for he came not; all in vain that they lingered and loitered till little feet were sodden and soaked with November's damp, and the careful mother had first to turn doctor and then to forbid any more such pilgrimages.

Twice Johnnie, being stouter and sturdier of build, was sent that the little maid might be satis-

fied; but Johnnie came back with only a shake of his blond head—the gentleman had not come.

"Nay, my bonnie bird, don't fret about it," the mother cried, seeing the tears of disappointment standing in the blue eyes; "the gentleman came to see the young lady, you know."

"He never did bring Miss Una no presents," sobbed the little B.-F. rebelliously.

"Ah! but he brought them for Miss Una all the same," the wise mother answered, drawing the pretty golden head close to her bosom.

"He brought them for *me*," cried little B.-F. indignantly.

The keeper's wife smiled, but did not contradict her. She was a wise woman—she knew her world well.

CHAPTER VI.

Before Mrs. Dane and her daughter returned to town Mrs. Dane gave their address to Hastings, telling him in polite and genial terms that she should be very glad to see him at any time that he happened to be in London, and also that she was at home formally on the first Wednesday of every month, and to her friends almost invariably on Sunday.

Hastings, however, only once had an opportunity of availing himself of the invitation during the first two months after the Danes turned their backs upon the Haymakers' Rest, as he found himself obliged to take his long leave after instead of before Christmas. But he had a two days' leave early in November, and hied him straight unto the pretty house in South Kensington where the Danes lived. It was not a Sabbath, nor yet the first Wednesday of the month, and he fairly shook in his shoes lest the reply to his inquiry should be, "Not at home."

"HOW LOVELY SHE LOOKED, WRAPPED TO THE THROAT IN DARK VELVET AND FURS!"

He found that he need not have shaken, for Mrs. Dane was at home, and he was shown into her presence, and was welcomed warmly.

"Una is not at home," she told him, seeing perhaps that he glanced round the room in an inquiring fashion. "She has gone down to Putney to see a great friend of hers, who is ill. But I don't think she'll be long, so pray let me hear all the Briarbush news at once."

"I'm afraid I haven't any Briarbush news, Mrs. Dane," he answered, reddening a little; "I have not—been there—very lately."

"Not even to see little B.-F.?" Mrs. Dane asked, with a quizzical look.

"Er—no—I—"

"Oh!" put in the artist, pitying his confusion. "I dare say you've been very busy. Officers always have so much to do."

"Yes, we have been busy," he said, quickly catching gladly at the excuse, and perfectly unaware that Mrs. Dane knew almost as much about the likelihood of there being a press of work during the leave-season as he did himself.

But in this case, ignorance being bliss, Hastings chatted gayly on, until by and by Una came. Oh!

how lovely she looked, wrapped to the throat in dark velvet and furs, until her pale face shone out clear as a cameo against its dark background. She was smiling, too, and her mother, seeing the smile, said, "What is it, Una?" and waited for her to speak, smiling broadly herself in anticipation of something good to come.

"It was a joke," Una answered. "You know," turning to Hastings, "I have been down to Putney. I came back as I went—by the 'bus; and on getting into the 'bus found the occupants of that humble vehicle were two overdressed young damsels armed with all the war-paint of tennis. "I don't fancy," critically, "that they were much of players, they made such a display of shoes and bats. Well, after I got in a sharp shower came on, and an elderly lady bustled across the road,—it's rather wide there by the church, you know,—and, panting, shoved herself in and sat down with a bump.

"'Oh, dear,' she gasped to me; 'but that's a sharp shower.'

"I said it was indeed a sharp shower; and she added that running did not suit her.

"I said that I should hardly think it would; and then she went on to remark that it was always best

to be prepared beforehand for any vagaries the clerk of the weather might choose to go in for,—words to that effect, you know,—and then she added, 'I'm sure,' pointedly addressing one of the damsels with the war-paint, 'I'm sure, miss, I think you're very wise to take your shoes out with you; it's most dangerous to sit in wet feet.'

"A look of the most unutterable and intense disgust came over the damsel's face. 'These are *tennis* shoes,' she said, giving the shoes a dignified flourish, and in a withering tone of sarcasm intended to crush the unfortunately ignorant old lady.

"'Ay, I'm sure; and very nice they are,' said the old lady, approvingly; 'they're nice and thick, and they haven't got no nasty heels to 'em. I call them sensible shoes, miss.'"

It was a pleasant half-hour which followed, but Mrs. Dane never left her chair for a moment, and Hastings had not the chance of a single word alone with Una. With the usual perversity of our frail humanity, he felt at that moment that if he but had her for ten minutes to himself he could settle everything, and would go out of the house a happy man for life—an accepted lover.

But the opportunity was not for him that day; and

as he went slowly through Onslow Gardens, Memory upbraided him roundly for not having made better use of the many golden chances which had been his in the by-gone days—of the long, dreamy, drowsy hours he had spent in the garden of the Haymakers' Rest, hours wherein a man might have proposed fifty times if he had chosen, and in which Alban Hastings would a few months before have declared himself able to propose to any woman in the world.

But when he had found himself alone, and face to face with the one woman whom he was most feverishly, desperately anxious to win, it was another matter quite: try as he would, he could never manage to bring his courage up to the point of speaking out; only, as is so often the case with us poor mortals, when a day came in which there chanced to be no golden hour, he was then perfectly convinced that had the golden hour been there the courage would have been there also.

Christmas came and went. To those who were to spend it with the regiment it was but a dull and depressing kind of festivity, and when a few days later those poor souls went off on long leave it was with a sense of intense satisfaction and exultant joy, of which Hastings's was certainly not the least visible.

And then disappointment awaited him—a double disappointment; for when he called on the Danes he found the house closed, or at least in the charge of a caretaker, who told him that the ladies had gone away,—gone into the country for a long visit,—she rather thought for more than one.

And, as if that was not a hard enough blow, to knock all the heart out of him, a few days later there came orders for the Soudan!

Of course he had to rejoin his regiment without the delay of an hour; and, in fact, went back to Warnecliffe in a towering rage, to find there other spirits equally as disgusted and as furious as himself.

"If I had only had my long leave I shouldn't have cared," Marcus Orford grumbled dejectedly; "but it is hard lines to be done out of, perhaps, the last long leave one will ever get."

"But think of the glory," put in Urquhart with a laugh.

"The glory—umph! I'd like to have had my leave and let the glory take care of itself."

"The *glory* of potting a few miserable devils of Arabs," cried Hastings, disdainfully.

"With always the chance of being potted one's

self," Urquhart reminded him. "Besides, just consider how foreign travel will improve your mind."

"Improve my mind!" Hastings repeated contemptuously. "Who wants his mind improved? Not I, for one."

"You said pretty much the same thing when you and I went off on march together last August, my friend," Urquhart persisted. "Lord, how you sulked! A bear with a sore head was a complete fool to you—a colorless, washed-out, namby-pamby picture of your frame of mind the day we rode out of the gates there. I wonder if you'll get over it as easily this time. Hardly as soon, for you won't see a single specimen of the other sex until we get to Suakin; and probably you won't have a great choice when we do get there."

"I should hope not," returned Hastings in disgust.

CHAPTER VII.

However, as is always the case when a regiment goes off to active service, at the appointed time the Black Horse went out of Warnecliffe with all honors, and, willing or unwilling, whether grumbling and growling, or cheery and contented of mind and manner, Alban Hastings had to go with the rest. He had a few hours' leave to go up to town the afternoon before they left, that he might say good-by to his people, who all came up from different parts of the country for the purpose; and I need hardly tell you that, my reader, I am sure, he made one more pilgrimage to the pretty house in South Kensington, but again he found only the ancient caretaker to receive him.

"The ladies is away," she said, shaking her head. "No, sir, I don't know nothink about their coming 'ome. I 'av'n't 'eard nothink. 'Ave I got the haddress? No, I 'av'n't that neither. The butler calls every morning and fetches their letters. He's a married man, and don't live in the 'ouse; but he

gets a right good time; no mistake about it. 'Alf his time with 'is ladies away, and full pay going on all the same as if they was at 'ome."

"You couldn't possibly find me the address?" Hastings asked, not so much because he wanted it, as because he liked to linger even on the threshold of *her* house.

The ancient lady shook her frowzy, black-capped head. "Sure I couldn't, for I 'av'n't got it, you see."

"Look here," said he suddenly, slipping a couple of broad silver pieces into her hand; "I'm going off to the war to-morrow—in Egypt, you know,"—he thought she wouldn't know what he meant if he said to service in the Soudan,—"and I want to see the studio and the drawing-room the last thing. Perhaps I may never come back again."

A sympathetic tear stood in each of the old lady's shrewd eyes instantly. "Going to the war, are you?" she said. "Eh, but I've one of the bonniest lads in the world, and he went last week. I'll never see no more of 'im, that's certain sure. Ay, come in, come in, and I'll show you all the rooms you like. There's the stew-do and the droring-room and the boodore and young miss's own room the next to that. Ay,

that's what you want to see, *I* know," as Hastings made an involuntary gesture. "Well, come along and I'll show you."

Except that they were a good deal wrapped up, the rooms were much as he had seen them on the occasion of his one visit to the house; but when the old caretaker pulled up the blinds of Una's own sleeping-chamber Hastings drew a long breath, and gazed around with something like awe. There was a little brass cot in the corner, with snowy muslin curtains hanging from a brass bar fixed to the ceiling; there were all the pretty odds and ends with which young ladies usually love to deck their toilet-tables and their mantel-shelves. And in one recess stood a neat rosewood davenport, and hanging on the wall above it a well-finished study in oils of the little B.-F. over at Briarbush.

"I shall never see you again, little B.-F.," said Hastings to himself, thinking only of the service of danger on which he was just going, and with never a thought of the eagerness with which the little blue-eyed golden-haired child might have watched for his coming, or the disappointment which the non-fulfilment of his promise to go over and see her sometimes, "even after Miss Una had gone away," had

probably caused her. "I shall never see you again, nor her. I wonder if she will be sorry?" and then seeing something lying on the floor beside the davenport, which Una's hand had probably let fall, he stooped and picked up—an envelope.

There is nothing very wonderful about an envelope, and this one was old, torn, soiled, and bore two post-marks; it was addressed to Miss Dane, the Haymakers' Rest, Briarbush, and displayed on the reverse the two black chargers supporting three Roman numerals XXV., which was the crest borne by his own regiment.

The handwriting was his own, and, taking advantage of the old lady's attention being directed at that moment to the window, Hastings slipped it into his pocket, and fished out another coin for her.

"I'm very much obliged to you; thank you greatly," he said, turning to leave the room.

"Not at all, sir; I've a lad in the army myself," she returned heartily. "I wish you God-speed and a safe return, just as I wished 'im," wiping her eyes with her apron the while. "And I'm not to say nothink about you 'aving bin—eh?"

"Oh, say I called; I'll leave a card," he replied. "The ladies will understand."

"Very good, sir. Oh, yes, they'll understand fast enough. Thank ye, sir. Lord love you."

Finally, Hastings got him out of the house and away from the fire of the old lady's grateful blessings. Then he had time and opportunity to have another look at the old envelope, when—yes—there was something inside it: he had unwittingly turned thief—thief at least of more than he had intended to steal. He opened it, and beheld—oh, how his heart beat, till he was indeed well-nigh suffocated—a little bunch of withered flowers!

Of course they were his—his—what he had given her: there were the faded corpses of two little rosebuds, two bits of gardenia, a bit of stephanotis, a few sprays of lilies of the valley, and some fronds of dried and brown maiden-hair. The wire which had kept them in place was still transfixing the rosebuds and the gardenias and the stephanotis, and there could be no doubt that it was one of the many such little bouquets which he had carried over to Briarbush from Warnecliffe. Perhaps it was the first; he tried to remember something definite about the first he had ever given her, but he could remember nothing. Still, there was no doubt whatever that it had been his gift, or that it had been

carefully treasured up, placed for protection in one of his own envelopes and for safety in one of the drawers of the pretty rosewood davenport.

From being one of the most miserable men under heaven, Alban Hastings went back to Warnecliffe an hour later as happy as—as—a king; nay, happier than the most blissfully happy and contented potentate anywhere to be found in the whole annals of the world's history. Truly, in some instances, it needs but a mere trifle to lift us into heaven or to cast us into hell.

CHAPTER VIII.

It would not in any way aid my story if I were to give a detailed account of the life led by the Black Horse in general and by Alban Hastings in particular when and after they reached Suakin.

They had the usual voyage out, the usual toss-up in the Bay of Biscay, the usual glimpse of Gibraltar, the usual panorama of the African coast, and a few hours' run ashore at Malta. They had the usual make-believe jollity and bravado delight at the prospect of real service, the usual spells of weariness and depression, the usual gallant efforts made by those of superior rank to alleviate the dulness between decks, the usual joy and delight to get ashore and have the journey over, although every man-jack of them, from the Colonel down to the youngest private, would each and all be pining and fretting in next to no time for the chance of getting home again. I must do Alban Hastings the justice to say that no poetic remarks as to the chances of glory and valor which the expedition afforded them

wherewith further to ennoble the gallant profession of arms to which they had the honor of belonging, no love of seeing strange countries and people, no golden opportunities of gathering together various trophies and curiosities of the Egyptian, the Arabian, and the African peoples, ever made the very smallest difference in his demeanor: from first to last it was unchanged, unaltered; it was one continuous, unvarying bitter hatred and detestation of everything—person, animal, circumstance, or incident—connected in any way whatever, no matter how remotely, with the Soudan campaign, and particularly with that portion of it which held Suakin as the base of its operations.

As did the others in the matter of everyday life, however, so did he. He worked when there was any work to do; and he worked well, but grumbled. He went out shooting when there was no work on hand; and though he shot well and made a big bag, he grumbled at that also: he grumbled at the flies and the heat and the dust—at everything. As Urquhart remarked one day, nothing seemed to give him the smallest gratification or pleasure. A fight between a couple of scorpions seemed to have no delight for his soul; and to see the bored air of

"HOW FOND THEY WERE OF EACH OTHER THEN!"

disgust with which he bundled a fine fat lizard out of his tent would have led any one who did not know otherwise to believe that fine, fat, freckled lizards were a luxury to which he had been accustomed from his youth up.

And then he was taken with enteric fever, and had to go on board the hospital-ship, and he did not appear to like that any better. There must have been a good deal of truth in what Urquhart had said—it really seemed as if there was no way or means of satisfying him.

But, jesting apart, it was not to be wondered at he did not appreciate a bad attack of enteric fever; for it was a bad one—so bad that he was within an ace of giving up the game altogether, and letting grim Death put an end to his grumbling forever. Day after day he lay in his swinging cot, existing on the weakest slops, three parts of his time slipping from delirium into lightheadedness, his own senses only coming to him now and then—like angel visits, few and far between.

It was strange that in those days of pain and weakness and danger he forgot all about Una Dane and Briarbush, and only remembered the earlier days when pretty Bessie, the gardener's daughter,

was all the world to him. Pretty Bessie! How fond they were of each other then; how heartless and cruel he had been to her afterwards, when he had begun to get weary of her! And how good it was of her to forgive and forget it all, and come to him in this his hour of need and distress!

"Bessie! Bessie!" he often cried out loud, so that every head in the cabin was turned to him, excepting such as were as addled and as fevered as his own. "Bessie! Bessie!"

"Yes, I am here," was the invariable reply. "What is it now, dear?"

"So thirsty—so good of you—so—" And then off he wandered again, babbling of the days of his boyhood, of the green fields at home and the thrush's nest down by the alders in the meadow, of the primroses and the yellow blossoms of the aconite which clustered around the foot of the great elm on the lawn in front of the drawing-room windows. "You remember that too, Bessie, don't you?" he cried one night to the sister who had charge of him. "You *can't* have forgotten it."

"Ah, no, dear. I remember it perfectly," was Sister Myra's answer, "and the lilies of the valley that strayed into the lawn-turf, and how father ran

them over with the mowing-machine. Oh! I remember it all perfectly."

"Ah! I thought you *couldn't* have forgotten it," he returned, with the petulance of extreme illness. "So good of you."

"You're a wonderful woman, sister," said the patient in the next cot, as Hastings sank off to sleep. "How in the world you can remember all the wild nonsense he gabbled yesterday, and satisfy his mind as you do, passes my comprehension."

"It comes quite easily to me, Lord Archie," said Sister Myra with a smile—a smile which puzzled Lord Archie not a little.

"You think he'll pull through it?" with an anxious gesture towards his comrade.

"Oh yes, please God," was the fervent reply.

The days wore on, but still Hastings did not come to his own senses or to a clear understanding as to where he was. Meantime Lord Archie, who was suffering from a painful gun-shot wound, and had the bullet still remaining somewhere about his collar-bone, got a little stronger, and was quietly lifted out of his cot one morning, placed on a stretcher, and carried on board a homeward-bound hospital-ship, his place being taken by another case

of fever as bad, if not worse, than that which kept Hastings a prisoner in the adjoining cot.

This all happened whilst Hastings was still back in the old days wandering hand-in-hand with pretty Bessie among the yellow primroses and the dark-leafed aconites.

And then there came a day, or rather a night, when in the still and silent hours the fever-light died out of his eyes, and he beheld not only the past but the present; when weak and worn to a shadow, with bones well-nigh starting through his skin, helpless as a child, and powerless to move hand or foot, he looked up wonderingly and with amazement into the face of Sister Myra in her gray and scarlet gown, and cried—cried—nay, rather whispered, or still better *framed*, with his poor colorless lips the one word "*Bessie!*"

Sister Myra bent down over the bed. "Yes, dear," she answered very softly.

"You *are* Bessie?" inquiringly.

"I *was*. They call me Sister Myra now. I put the old name off with the old life, Alban."

But her face belied her words: if she had put off the old life with the old name, why need she then have flushed and paled as she did beneath his wondering gaze?

Yes. She had put off the old name; but the old life—*that* was another matter. She might be wearing the scarlet and gray garb of a Netley sister or nurse. She might even have schooled herself into the belief that she had grown utterly indifferent to the lover of her girlhood—the lover who had deserted her because he had grown a little weary. She might have believed in her heart that she had quite given up pining after the past, that he was now as less than nothing to her; but when he was carried on board the hospital-ship, lying helplessly at death's door, she forgot all save that he was the man whom she *had* loved. He might be worthless, heartless, unstable, fickle,—oh! all the thousand and one terms of reproach which may be hurled at the head of a man who is not constant in love,—yes, he might be all these, but he was weak and suffering, and she had loved him once.

It was her duty to nurse him, to bring him back from the jaws of death; if human skill and devotion would avail in such a case—it was her *duty* to do it. So it is not surprising that when duty, for which she had given up her life, went, as it went in nursing him, hand in hand with her whole, true, fond woman's heart, that the past and the present

became united, and that Alban Hastings—the man whom she had loved once, the man for whom she had risked all, the man whom she had lost—rose once again to be the joy of her life, the pole-star of her heart; the man not whom she *had* loved, but whom she loved now with all the old passionate, reckless, fierce love, grown deeper and stronger. It had been a girl's fancy then—it was the love of a woman now!

And Alban Hastings—what of him? Of his feelings when he found himself dependent for every comfort and ease of life upon the woman whose girlhood he had blighted, whose love he had cast aside as a thing of naught because it had been given to him freely and ungrudgingly, and was therefore not of as great value as if he had been forced to strive hard for it and win it against the world—what of them? Well! through all those long and weary weeks of pain and sickness,—sickness so extreme that the burden of life seemed at times too heavy a load for his feeble frame to carry a step farther,—through all the strain of partial convalescence, with its attendant fretfulness and famishing hunger, through the danger of a severe relapse and a still more lengthened and wearisome train of after-

symptoms—through all that he had but one sense, one feeling, one idea—that was of the comfort her presence gave him. There was such support in the knowledge that what could be done by the power of human skill and devotion to save him alive from the pestilence which had so sorely beset him surely would be done. There was such a stay for his weak soul in the fact that she was ever at hand to fulfil his slightest and most capricious desire. The sight of her lovely face, the beauty of her great, true, loving eyes, the touch of the old dialect in her accents,—the dialect which the people spoke *at home*, —the clasp of her firm strong hands, the mere fact of her presence, all combined to make a strong anchor to which he might make fast even when he had almost slipped from this world into the borderlands of the next, and already had begun with faint and faltering footsteps to ford the dark waters of that river which we can breast but once, and over which never man crossed from that side to this since the Blessed Saviour died on the Cross and rose to light the world.

His song at this time had but one burden, sung in but one strain—it was so good of her, so good to forget the past, to condone the cruelty, the coldness,

the desertion of the by-gone days, and only to remember that he was weary and sick, sick unto death in a land of sand and thorns. Oh! it was so good, so good; there was nobody in all the wide world half so noble, so good, so clever and deft-handed as Bessie! His dear little darling Bessie!

And then—when he was getting a little better, and could just bear to whisper into her ear when she had ten minutes to spare and could sit by his bed and listen—he would wander on about the days of their childhood. What fun they used to have down by the riverside in the big meadow over by the park! Did Bessie remember it? What pleasure in wood and dale, and how, when the reservoir up at Charlton burst, and the waters flooded meadow and park alike, right up to the high-road and the very gates of the drawing-room pleasaunce—Bessie could not have forgotten that? For if she would remember it, he had built a raft and they had had glorious games of shipwreck and Robinson Crusoe; how they had rescued various odds and ends of furniture and clothing, and a wee stray kitten which came swinging down stream clinging to a tub and screaming piteously; and how soon after that a wee baby followed in a cradle, and they had grappled it

to the side of the raft with a rake and brought it safely in—no, not safely, for the wee babe was lying in that peaceful sleep which has no awaking in this world! And how Bessie had wept over the little dead face, all blue and pinched with the cold of a night's exposure to the pitiless storm of waters, and then—why, Bessie, Bessie, what could there be in the recollection of that long-departed scene of their childhood to make Sister Myra break down altogether into a passionate storm of tears? Well, it was only the remembrance of another little dead face over which she had sobbed and wept in the passion of heart-broken despair—a little dead face which Alban Hastings had never seen, though it was the image of his own. That was all. No such wonderful thing; only a stray bit of the flotsam and jetsam of this life; a thing not of much value to any one, but which had nevertheless left a blank space in Sister Myra's heart which not even Alban Hastings would ever be quite able to fill up.

However, it was not often that the by-gone memories troubled her; she was too all-happy in the present. What was the past to her, even though one page was turned down and could never be folded back without the keenest pain and self-re-

proach? What was the past? Ay, and a wiser head than hers would have asked, Where and what was the future? Where would her life lie? What would it be? But Sister Myra never did: she had the present, the blissful, intoxicating present, with its thousand soft, womanly, tender cares, and she looked no farther. She had chosen the path of duty, and duty had given her the care of him, had brought him sick and in need, asking forgiveness and comfort of her. Could she refuse them, or trouble about the time to come? No—a thousand times no! She was a real woman, and did not even doubt him enough to notice that in all his whisperings and confidences, amid all his reminiscences and recollections, he never hinted at the future—never spoke of what was to come, never attempted to picture the after-years.

CHAPTER IX.

And by and by Alban Hastings began to improve in health and strength, and was able to bear being carried out under the awning on deck and have visitors from ashore; mostly the fellows, whose visits broke the monotony of the weary, uneventful days, and who brought him such odds and ends of news and gossip as they were able to gather in that benighted abiding-place.

Amongst them came Marcus Orford, hale and strong as if he had never suffered a day's illness in his life, who told him, amongst other items of news, that Archie Falconer had had exceptional luck in the way of recovery, having been seized with a violent fit of sea-sickness just after leaving Port Said, which, though it had prostrated him greatly, had done him the good service of jerking the bullet out of its hiding-place, and had enabled him to land at Southampton very far on the high-road to health and strength. Hastings felt quite a delightful little glow of pleasure to hear it; it was so refreshing to know

that any one had got safely out of the Valley of Death, as the Black Horse had come to call Suakin amongst themselves.

It was after this that he began to make real and rapid progress towards recovery himself, and began also to think with longing of the people at home and the dear country of his birth—which, in spite of all his many grumblings, he had ever held at its proper value; to think of English comforts and enjoyments; to crave, with a craving which possessed him like a fever, for cool winds and green fields.

And then, when such thoughts as these had fairly taken possession of him, it was naturally not very long before an equally pronounced distaste for all his surroundings came also: first, a realization of the intense discomfort of a hospital-ship; then a conviction that he had not half the edible comforts he ought to have; then—then—for of course it was, and had been from the very first, quite sure to come sooner or later—a setting up for comparison in his own mind the two women who had of late most powerfully swayed his nature—Sister Myra and Una Dane.

Is it necessary for me to say that in spite of the devotion, the grand spirit of forgiveness and self-

renunciation which she had shown to him, in spite of the tender love with which she had nursed him and brought him back to life from the very gate of death, Sister Myra was the one to suffer by the comparison?

I hardly think so! He began, after a while, to perceive that although Sister Myra's hands were strong and firm and helpful, they were neither so white nor so soft as those of the artist's daughter, with their calm and placid ways, and her dainty, delicate, cobweb handiwork. He realized that although Sister Myra made in her gray and scarlet nurse's gown a picture which brought gladness and peace and joy to the hearts of many and many a sick and weary sufferer on board that ship, yet—shame on him for it—there was a lack of the well-trained and easy grace which had so greatly charmed him in Una Dane.

He found very soon that the slightly less refined accents grated on his ears and jarred his senses, while in truth his ears ought to have shrivelled up sooner than have caught anything but the true love which rang in all Sister Myra's tones; and after this it was but a very short time ere he admitted to his heart—what he called his heart—that Una Dane was the woman he loved, while Sister Myra was only the

woman who loved him—God help her!—nothing more than that.

Of course, before he was sent home he would have to make Sister Myra understand this clearly—it would be only honest to do it. Some fellows, he argued, might just sneak off, and let time do the rest—let time break the truth to her; but he was not one of that sort. It would be very painful, very painful indeed, and he hoped Bessie would not take it badly, but be sensible and collected over it. Of course, she never could reasonably expect him to *marry* her; it was utterly out of the question and impossible, even supposing there was no Una Dane to be considered! If his affections were free to bestow—which was not so—he would never be able to take home a wife who had been born in the gardener's cottage of his estate, more particularly when everybody knew perfectly well that she had been a servant in his mother's house and had left it—well, without explanation. Of course it was quite impossible. And thus, even supposing he was otherwise free and unfettered, and wished to marry her, he would on this account be obliged to leave the army and live abroad, or at least quite away from his own place. So to speak, he would have to exile himself from the home of his ancestors, and—oh!

well, of course, it would not do at all, and Bessie must be made to clearly understand it.

But all this time Sister Myra, who waited and tended upon him with the same untiring devotion which she had shown all along, noticed nothing, guessed nothing, of what was passing in his mind. She looked forward to his being sent home with mingled feelings of gladness and dread—gladness that his fast-returning strength would have the best chance of all of being built up into really good health; dread that all the lightness and joy would pass out of her life until they should meet again. But that before long they would meet again, Sister Myra's honest soul never entertained so much as the shadow of a doubt. So she was glad and sorry, grave and gay, jubilant yet cast down, at the thought of the coming parting, though she had no idea of its being a parting but for a little time.

At this time she used to sing softly to herself the refrain of a little song which she had often heard one of her patients crooning over after he had had a letter from his sweetheart at home:

"But time shall show
I have lived not in vain;
For love is only waiting
Until we meet again."

It was wonderful how the pretty tender words comforted her.

And at last Hastings got the news that he was to be sent home the following day; and then, then, oh! how his heart leapt and passionately beat at the thought that after a few weeks he might, nay, he should, find himself face to face with Una Dane, when all would be right between them forever, and they would slip through the rapids of courtship into the smooth waters of married life, down which they would glide in ease and peace and goodness—yes, he ended with goodness, though I doubt greatly if he had ever looked for or desired it in all his life before—until that darkness should fall upon them from which he had so lately escaped for a little season.

And there still remained to tell Bessie! In spite of that other powerful magnet which was drawing his heart toward the old country, his heart sank very low in his bosom as Sister Myra came to his bedside; but he must tell her—there was no help for it. Of course, if he were like some fellows, he might go home and say nothing of his plans; but he couldn't do that. If he was anything, he was a man of honor, and when he went home to claim Una Dane

as his wife he would go with a clean slate. Yes, he would do that.

"You know I've got my route, Bessie?" he began, in a timid sort of way, and without looking at her.

"Yes, dear," in a cheerful tone, or what sounded so.

"You won't mind? you won't worry about me?" half anxiously. "I hope you are glad for me, Bessie?"

"Very glad. I shall be thankful when you are away from this, more thankful when I hear you have landed safe and sound," she answered firmly; "but as for missing you—why, yes, I shall miss you, and I'm afraid I shall worry too, till I hear you've borne the journey well."

"It's my only chance," he sighed, laying his hand upon hers. Then he remembered the new state of affairs, and took it away again. "I—I—" with a faint accent of reproach, "I thought you would be a little glad."

"I *am* glad," Sister Myra cried, hurt by the tone. "I rejoice in anything that is for your welfare. Surely, Alban, you will believe that?"

"Oh, yes, yes; but you seemed rather to grudge my going home, or I fancied it."

"You fancied it," said Sister Myra, promptly.

She had brought him a newspaper and a magazine, and he took up the paper then, and began crumpling and twisting and turning it with his thin nervous fingers. She went on speaking:

"You know surely by this time, my dearest, that with me *your* welfare, *your* pleasure, *your* happiness, comes before all, in front of everything. I would give up my very life to serve you. Then, do you think that for my pleasure I would keep you here in this death-stricken place for a single day—nay, for a single hour?"

"No, I don't think you would, Bessie. You're a good girl, and I'm sure you've been awfully good and—and—kind and all that to me, whilst I've been laid by the leg here; awfully good, and I'll never forget it, never. Of course it was very odd our meeting as we did, wasn't it? And I know you've looked after me for the sake of the old times, and all that. What fun we had when we were boy and girl together, hadn't we?"

He felt that he was getting confused and mixed, the more so the farther he went; but as Sister Myra never helped him out by so much as a word, he could only go stammering and blundering helplessly on.

"You know, of course, Bessie, I am very grateful to you for all your kindness to me. I shall send you a handsome present to remember me by as soon as ever I get home, and—and—I shall always be glad to hear of you and that you are getting on well—always; you know that, don't you, Bessie? But I don't suppose we shall see much of each other again, as I shan't be in the service very long. I'm going to leave it, you know; in fact, that's to say,—yes, I may as well tell you at once, without making any bones about it,—I'm going home to be married, Bessie, to a lady who is very beautiful and very clever, quite young, and a great artist's daughter. And I'm sure," suddenly altering his tone, abandoning the stammer and the blundering, and adopting a highly proper and moral air, "I hope you'll see the matter in the right light, and take it in a proper spirit, because—well, because—" But here he came to a sudden standstill, and renewed his nervous twitching and pulling of the newspaper which she had brought him, and lay back in his chair waiting for her to speak.

But Sister Myra did not speak at all—never uttered one word; and a silence fell upon them which

Alban Hastings positively had not enough courage to break.

Instead he smoothed out the paper and began diligently studying it, as men do when they have come to an utter standstill in a conversation, while Sister Myra sat beside him without moving, like a block of wood or a stone.

At first he was so confused and disturbed that he could not see a word; the lines of print jumped up and down in front of his eyes in dazzling confusion —and then—and then—he all at once realized that they were still now. Yes, still, though his hand was shaking like an aspen leaf, his breath was coming hard and fast in great gasps, and the sweat stood out upon his brow in great drops of cold agony.

For this was what he read:

"On the 19th inst., at St. Mary Abbotts, Kensington, Lord Archie Falconer, Captain of the 25th Dragoons, to Una, only child of the late Everard Dane."

And when after a long time he turned instinctively for comfort to Sister Myra, little sunny-haired Bessie, the playfellow of his childhood, the woman who had loved him through all and in spite of all, there was no longer any comfort there, for Sister

"SISTER MYRA SAT BESIDE HIM WITHOUT MOVING, LIKE A BLOCK OF WOOD OR A STONE."

Myra was a Netley nurse no longer, and the gray and scarlet gown only covered something which a few short moments before *had been* a living, loving woman.

It was of no use to cry out aloud for doctors and nurses; no use to wring his nervous, wasted hands, and proclaim passionately that he had loved her, loved her, loved her. It was no use to tell his own miserable stricken conscience that it had been but a passing infatuation which had possessed him for Archie Falconer's wife, that his heart had been all the time with little Bessie: for little Bessie was dead—dead—dead; and the ears which had never before been deaf to any tone or inflection of his voice were deaf to everything now, and would never listen again to the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely.

And this was the man who had said of himself, if he was anything he was a man of honor.

THE END.

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